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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001012

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06-17-14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: In a well-received public speech, Maldivian President proposes sweeping constitutional reforms

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS 06-17-04 unclass email

- (B) Colombo 842, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.

Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: In a June 9 landmark public speech, Maldivian President Gayoom recommended a series of constitutional reforms to be considered by a special parliamentary session. Gayoom's proposals would mark a great step forward in building democracy in Maldives. They have been well-received as Maldivians feel he has recognized the larger public debate on increased political openness that has begun across the nation. Members for the Special Majlis have been selected, representing a cross section of political views, and are set to begin work on the proposed reforms in July. Some powerful members of Gayoom's cabinet oppose the proposed reforms. We believe that Gayoom's efforts to steer change in a positive direction are laudatory and should be supported by the international community. We suggest a letter of encouragement and support be sent to him from the Secretary. See Action Request in Para 10. END SUMMARY.

Gayoom publicly outlines reforms

¶12. (C) On June 9, President Abdul Maumoon Gayoom hosted a first-of-its-kind town hall meeting at the Islamic Center on Male' to outline suggested constitutional reforms (Ref A). Contacts have said that close to one thousand people came to hear the President speak and even members of the Majlis (Parliament) were not able to find seats. Characterized as "historic and far-reaching" by the government-owned press, HAVEERU, the reforms will be considered by the Special Majlis (see more below), when it convenes in July.

¶13. (C) Along with suggested changes to the judiciary and the procedure for constitutional amendments, highlights of Gayoom's constitutional reform proposals follow:

Presidency:

-- change the manner in which the president is elected including possible direct election
-- set term limits for the office
-- allow women to run for the office
-- create a prime minister position to take over some of the powers of the president.

Legislature:

-- abolish the category of appointed members in the Majlis
-- elect members by proportional representation.

Fundamental Rights:

-- legalize political parties
-- give a constitutional mandate to the Human Rights Commission.

¶14. (C) During the speech, Gayoom made clear that he was speaking for himself only, and not on behalf of his Cabinet. Minh Pham, UNDP Resident Representative for Maldives, told the Ambassador that one of Gayoom's greatest challenges to achieving his reforms would be opposition from his closest political colleagues, including the powerful Foreign Minister and Minister of Defense and National Security. Pham felt, however, that there was growing support for the impending reforms and many Maldivians were reacting positively to the President's suggestions. The challenge would be to keep the process orderly so that those opposed to change would not over-react. In the worst case, Pham thought, the military (controlled by the National Security Minister) might be tempted to step in.

¶15. (C) Separately, in a June 10 press statement, the anti-Gayoom Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which is currently prohibited in Maldives, also welcomed the constitutional reforms proposed by the President.

Mohamed Latheef, MDP co-founder, said that he was optimistic about Gayoom's speech and the possibility that the reforms would be substantive. While MDP members will push for full recognition of political parties in Maldives, he cautioned that the government needed to uphold what was already mandated, claiming the constitution currently allowed political parties.

Additional calls for change

16. (C) The reforms that President Gayoom presented on June 9 are not the only changes facing the country. The government-owned news website HAVEERU has reported on several other calls for increased governmental openness. (The government was stunned in September 2003 when riots rocked the capital, Male', in response to the abuse and death of a prisoner on a nearby prison island and many of the changes in Maldives were prompted by this event.) For example, the Attorney General has proposed an amendment to increase freedom of speech in the press, as well as drafted a Freedom of Information Act bill for the regular Majlis to consider in its next session. Separately, HAVEERU reported on a public debate to privatize some of the local Maldivian television channels.

Special Majlis ready to begin work

17. (C) Preparations for the 100-member Special Majlis to address the issues of constitutional reform are proceeding. President Gayoom called for the special session in February. Forty-two members were elected on May 28 and 8 members were appointed by the President on June 11 to augment the 50 regular Majlis members. Gayoom swore in the new members of the Special Majlis on June 15, with plans for the group to begin meeting in mid-July. Government interlocutors have said they expect the special session to last at least several months. Noting that Gayoom had publicly asked all citizens to submit suggestions for constitutional changes, one GoRM official thought that the Special Majlis could last for close to one year, depending on the number of suggested reforms it received.

18. (C) In discussions about the composition of the Special Majlis, Minh Pham said the 100-member group was politically diverse with almost an equal number of members favoring far-reaching reform as those wishing to minimize it. This diversity is in contrast to the makeup of the regular Majlis, which Pham characterized as 80 percent anti-reform. Reinforcing Pham's analysis of the Special Majlis members, a June newsletter from the MDP also claimed victory in the Special Majlis elections, stating "many prominent members" of the party had won seats.

Comment

19. (C) After 25 years of autocratic rule, President Gayoom seems to be aware of, and responding to, the growing cadence of voices calling for more political openness in the island nation. During A/S Rocca's call on Gayoom on May 17 (Ref B), she recognized the economic progress he had brought to Maldives and urged him to leave a legacy of political progress. Gayoom seems to be doing that and to be willing to confront many of his own supporters while doing so. We believe we should support Gayoom in these efforts. If Gayoom succeeds, Maldives could serve as an example to the world of a truly democratic and prosperous Muslim nation. We suggest a letter of encouragement and support from the Secretary (see suggested text below). END COMMENT.

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Action Request

10. (C) Suggested text of a letter from the Secretary to President Gayoom:

Begin Text:
Complimentary Opening.

I would like to compliment you on your significant efforts towards strengthening democracy and human rights in Maldives. I read with great interest your June 9 public speech proposing substantial changes which would increase the political rights of all Maldivian citizens.

We witness every day the struggle of people all over the world to strengthen democracy. It is very encouraging that you and your fellow Maldivians are working to strengthen democracy in a peaceful and orderly manner.

I admire your leadership and encourage you and all Maldivians to persevere with your reform efforts, which can set an example for the world.

Complimentary Closing.

End Text.

END ACTION REQUEST.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD